Essential Understandings

Asian Pacific American

The Asian Pacific American community is created by social and political forces. Some ethnic groups have been considered Asian Pacific American at one point in history, but not at another point. For example, Asian Indians were classified by the U.S. Census as "White" in 1950, but as "Asian" in 1980. In some cases, an ethnic or national origin group may advocate for inclusion in the larger Asian Pacific American category to gain recognition or political power. In others, the government may categorize a group as Asian Pacific American through offering particular choices on government forms. As a result, the boundaries defining the Asian Pacific American community are fluid and have changed over time.

Socioeconomic resources vary greatly within the Asian Pacific American community U.S. Census data show that as a group, Asian Pacific Americans demonstrate high levels of educational and income attainment. However, this is not the case for every Asian Pacific American subgroup. Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong tend to lag far behind the general population in terms attaining a high school education. The percent of South East Asian Pacific Americans with a Bachelor's degree is lower than that among Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans. Cambodians, Hmong, and Lao also exhibit much higher rates of poverty than the general U.S. population. Higher income and education among Asian Pacific Americans can be attributed to Asian Pacific Americans' relative concentration in high cost-of-living cities, families that tend to include more workers per household on average, and U.S. immigration policies that prioritize recruitment of highly educated workers from Asia.

The "Model Minority" stereotype associated with Asian Pacific Americans is problematic. Since the late 1960s, Asian Pacific Americans have been praised as examples of academic and economic success, especially after decades of racial discrimination. Many have emphasized the role of Asian cultural values to explain the economic and educational achievements of the community. Critics of the stereotype contend that the stereotype is used to undermine protests against persistent racial discrimination. Further, the stereotype assumes that success is based upon cultural values, and neglects the role of U.S. immigration policy in terms of actively recruiting highly skilled workers from Asia.

The diversity of Asian Pacific Americans is reflected in their identities. The term "Asian American" was coined by historian Yuji Ichioka, and is a lasting legacy of 1960s and 1970s social movement organizing. The term sought to replace the often derogatory term, "Oriental," with something of the community's own creation. "Asian American" is an umbrella term that encompasses over 25 ethnic groups from East Asia, South Asia, and South East Asia. The term "Asian Pacific American" includes Pacific Islands Americans (which refers to the indigenous people from islands of the Pacific Ocean, and not to the Pacific Rim in general). Neither term can fully describe Asian Pacific Americans' complex experiences of nativity, displacement, multiple migrations, and multiethnic identities. Asian Pacific Americans have individual feelings about their racial categorization, ethnic identity, cultural heritage and family background, and nationality, and cannot be forced into any single identity.

Asian Pacific Americans have a long history in the United States Approximately 75% of Asian Pacific American adults living in the United States today are foreign-born, but Asian Pacific Americans have a long history in this country. In the 1760s, sailors from the Philippines settled in the state now known as Louisiana. They arrived on Spanish ships that were part of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade. In the 1860s, thousands of Chinese workers helped build the First Transcontinental Railroad, a nearly 2000 mile railroad that connected the Pacific Coast to Eastern railroad lines. In 1870, nearly 10 percent of California's population was of Chinese origin.

The rights of Asian Pacific Americans have been deeply affected by changing definitions of U.S. citizenship. In 1790 Congress limited naturalization on to "free white persons." In every Naturalization Act from 1790 to 1952, Congress included being a "white person" as a prerequisite for naturalized citizenship. In 1870, naturalization rights were extended to "aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent," but Asian Pacific Americans were not mentioned in the new law. Although Chinese immigrants were not allowed to naturalize at the time, in 1898, the Supreme Court ruled that Wong Kim Ark who had traveled to China after being born in San Francisco, CA, was a citizen of the United States. This decision reinforced the general principle of birthright citizenship for all Americans. In the early 1920s, immigrants from Japan and India challenged laws that restricted naturalization to those deemed white, but were unsuccessful. These cases forced the court to define particularly racial categories and the rights associated with each.

The Asian Pacific American population experienced major population growth after 1965 due to changes in U.S. immigration policy. In 1960, fewer than 1 million people identified as Asian in the U.S. Census. In 1980, this number had grown to 3.5 million. In 2010, more than 17 million people identified as Asian Pacific American, including nearly 1.5 million who identify as "Pacific Islander." This growth is largely due to the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which replaced a system that allowed only small quotas of people from outside of Western Europe to immigrate to the U.S. with a system that prioritized immigrants with high-skills and those who have family members in the United States.